

CONSIDERING HORROR PANEL DISCUSSION

This discussion brought together critics and scholars to discuss the films shown in the Museum's groundbreaking series *It's Only a Movie: Horror Films from the 1970s and Today*. The series was organized by assistant curator Livia Bloom, who moderated this lively discussion with: Adam Lowenstein, author of *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* and cinema studies professor at the University of Pittsburgh; Nathan Lee, film critic for *The Village Voice*; Maitland McDonagh, author of *Filmmaking on the Fringe: The Good, the Bad, and the Deviant Directors* and film critic for *TV Guide*; and Joshua Rothkopf, film critic for *Time Out New York*.

Panel discussion with Nathan Lee, Adam Lowenstein, Maitland McDonagh, and Joshua Rothkopf, moderated by Assistant Curator Livia Bloom (June 17, 2007):

LIVIA BLOOM: Please join me in welcoming Nathan Lee, film critic for *The Village Voice*. Adam Lowenstein, professor at the University of Pittsburgh, and author of *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. (Applause) Maitland McDonagh, film critic for *TV Guide*, and among many other books, the author of *Filmmaking on the Fringe: The Good, the Bad, and the Deviant Directors*. (Applause) And Joshua Rothkopf, film critic for *Time Out New York*. (Applause)

By way of introduction, I would like to ask each of our panelists—and I'll start with Nathan—what was your first profound encounter with a horror film; the first time that a film made you think that there could be something valuable here?

NATHAN LEE: Hm... Horror films were the first genre that I really loved as a kid. And I didn't see them in theaters, I saw them on VHS at home. I think the first film that had a really big impact on me, that has affiliations with the horror genre was probably *Videodrome*, the David Cronenberg film. I had been watching slasher films and watching sort of pulp horror films before that, but that was the first film I saw—and I was maybe fifteen... fourteen, fifteen—that I knew something more was going on than just the kind of kicks of a horror film. And then from that,

I became obsessed with Cronenberg and I think it really sort of started there for me.

ADAM LOWENSTEIN: I think for me, I have vivid memories of catching some of my first horror images as a kid on television, and often in the context of a babysitter who let my brother and I stay up later than we normally would have. And I think at the time, I didn't even know the name of the film—but you know, as time went on and this became my profession, I of course researched it and found out what it was—but I have vivid memories of a film called *Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things* (Laughter) as being a film that really kind of blew my mind at the time, and kind of got me intrigued about the kind of possible reactions you could have to images of horror—a kind of combination of pleasure and repulsion and intrigue and fright... that's how I remember it starting.

MAITLAND MCDONAGH: I also got my first taste of horror from an inattentive babysitter. Her name was Chantal, and she let me watch things I shouldn't have watched, because they gave me nightmares... but they also gave me a taste for more of that stuff. And I remember spending a lot of my youth looking at the teeny-tiny little ads that would appear in newspapers for things that were playing in Times Square. I mean, tiny—less than an inch square. And I wanted to see all those movies. And finally, when I was twelve, I told my parents some lie, and went and saw Oliver Stone's *Seizure*, at the Selwyn Theater. And it was a rubber reality movie starring Jonathan Frid from *Dark Shadows*, a show that I loved. And it's the one that made me

think—“Ok, now I really need more of this. I need to see all these movies. I need to see them all.” And I’m still working on it. (Laughter)

JOSHUA ROTHKOPF: For me—William Castle would be happy—but it was a poster. I remember it being—I wasn’t even ten yet, and I think I was at camp. We went to some playground, and I saw a poster for the movie *Alien*, the first *Alien*. And it was like—I think I was nine—and there was a monster on somebody’s face! And there was a big egg! And people in frozen containers! And everything... And I was way too young to go see the movie. Later on, I would learn that all the revulsion that I would have, just at the poster, was all intended, and all the fear that I had of—you know, being impregnated! And things shooting out of your body! And everything...!—that that was all part of the point. And I remember being thrilled and kind of unhinged, even at the time, and hoping to reclaim that sort of feeling. There’s something about watching these horror films, it’s very—it’s liberating, as a viewer, because you’re really taken to a place where you’re not in control. And the only control comes from choosing to see the film. And then you sit down and then it’s like—“Oh, my God, there’s going to be an egg or a face or something!”—you know? (Laughter) But that was probably the moment for me.

BLOOM: How do you think that the horror films of the 1970s reflected their time? And how do today’s horror films reflect the contemporary world? Maybe we should start with Adam on this one.

LOWENSTEIN: Well, I think one of the great things about this series, and one of the exciting things about it is that it really does stage an opportunity for audiences to work through this question on their own terms. I mean, the films that have been chosen for this series really do invite us all to think about: Well, what was going on in those films of the seventies? What’s going on in the films of today? And is there a relationship between these things?

My feeling is that in a lot of ways—the films from the present, I like to think about it as a kind of continuously unfolding post-9/11 moment—the films from this series that represent that moment are plugged into their social and historical context in pretty complicated and compelling and moving ways. I think our reaction, for most people, is to

say—“Whatever way these new films are plugged in, it’s not as powerful, it’s not as compelling, it’s not as sophisticated as the seventies films.” And one of the things that’s not really fair about that comparison is that we’ve had a lot more time to think about the seventies, and to think about Vietnam, and to think about what that era meant, and what it was all about. And we have the benefit of that hindsight to really look at something like *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and say, “Look, there’s the turmoil of that era, right up there on the screen. How could you even argue that that’s not happening?” In a way, with the films of today, in those moments that seem powerfully plugged in, there’s always a kind of lingering sense of, “Well, what is this historical moment about in the first place?”

BLOOM: What’s an example of one of them?

LOWENSTEIN: Well, I think about, for example—one of the films in the series that’s being screened here is *28 Weeks Later*, which is a film that seems, on its surface, to very much understand itself as an Iraq War allegory. It’s complete—it’s an American occupation of a foreign country, with a Green Zone. I mean, all these things are right up there on the surface. But as the film goes on, you realize that it’s not a film that’s really interested or invested in spinning out that allegory in a sustained way. It’s more interested in saying, “Oh, look. Here’s a scene from *Night of the Living Dead*, and here’s a scene from *Dawn of the Dead*, and here’s a scene from *Day of the Dead*. And it gets more caught up in that kind of genre mythology and genre referencing than kind of sustaining itself as an Iraq War allegory. But the glimmers are there. And what I would say is that in time, those glimmers are going to seem more and more clear.

LEE: In places where you don’t always expect them.

LOWENSTEIN: Absolutely.

LEE: I mean, it’s important in this kind of a talk to remember what Andrew Sarris once said, which is—“You’re always too close to the popular cinema of your time to really understand it.”

LOWENSTEIN: Absolutely.

LEE: You need that historical distance. And what may look allegorical to us now—like in *28 Weeks Later*—thirty years from now we may be looking at a movie like *The Descent*, which doesn't have an obvious political allegory, and see something there that we're not seeing now. So you know, there's...

LOWENSTEIN: Right, right.

LEE: It is interesting, though, that some of the subtext has become text, in the current round of horror films. Horror films are clearly and overtly responding to contemporary events, in a way that... I think in the earlier incarnation: It was more coded, it was more buried, and it was things that were revealed over time. There's a self-consciousness now about what I think is sometimes an opportunistic kind of allegorical aspect of these films—but it's definitely come to the fore.

MCDONAGH: I should also say—I'm the person on this panel who's old enough to have seen those films in the seventies, when they were new, and I'll tell you—I vividly remember that the feeling of the seventies was that the world was coming to an end. You know? The gas crisis; the Vietnam War just dragging on and on and on; turning on the TV every night and seeing bodies bags; racial conflict... all of that was part of what you lived every day. It produced a kind of a low level constant anxiety that you were never free of. And those films of the seventies, those horror films of the seventies—*Night of the Living Dead*, *Deathdream*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—all had that same anxiety built into them. So even if you couldn't see the obvious allegorical aspect of those films, you would see those movies and feel like, "Wow, that is what I feel like! Those movies are really capturing the feeling that I have every time I turn on the news; every time I think about the world I live in." It was extremely vivid.

ROTHKOPF: And this is obviously markedly different from the horror that we saw in the nineties, where it was all like, "Will Neve Campbell figure it out?" (Laughter) Or some kind of snarky horror, where the self-referentiality is about, "How much do you know horror genre movies?" Or conversely, in the nineties, you had the rise of the serial killer—who is the ultimate bourgeois consumer, Clintonite consumer. And now, these new movies feel very much more politically explicit; more fetishistically

explicit, in terms of their violence; and it definitely feels like something different, after the J-horror transitional phase.

BLOOM: Can you be more specific?

ROTHKOPF: Well, that's a good... I remember the first movie—in what I would like to consider a new trend, this new horror—that really struck me was *Final Destination 2*. And there is something to be said for the fact that we're not uncritical fans of this genre. You know, we have our likes and dislikes, and this is—

MCDONAGH: Though we are fans, make no mistake.

ROTHKOPF: Though we are fans, certainly. But I remember seeing *Final Destination 2*. And the idea of this sort of free floating death from above, and plate glass falling from the sky and crushing people, and wires severing people—and that it was inevitable that you were going to be destroyed, just from these everyday objects coalescing—that felt very much what I was feeling at the time, in terms of my own fears in living in New York, post-September 11th. And I don't think that the writer-director, James Wong, was specifically articulating that in a conscious way, but the film does. Or we can read into these films—we can make meaning of these films where we need it to be. And that, to me—I mean, when I look at the news and there's very little discussion of what this fear is, yet I'm seeing it in the horror films—that makes the genre more interesting; it makes it more significant.

LEE: Well, it's interesting something you said—"We find in these films the things that we need,"—that there are things that we need from horror films. And I think one of the most obvious explanations for these ideas of "torture porn" and "torture chic" that are out there, and this return of really intense torture in the movies, is that these are things that we know now are out there. I mean, these things are being talked about in the highest levels of our government and in our media: that we live in a culture of torture now, where torture is a fact of our existence in a way it never has been before.

ROTHKOPF: Or *not* talked about by...

LEE: But we don't see it. We don't actually get to see it. And these films show it to us. And on some

level, I think we need to see that right now. We need to see people being tortured, because we know this is happening—we know we have some responsibility in it. And horror films, on one level, are a way of us confronting that and becoming complicit in it, and taking maybe a kind of responsibility for it.

LOWENSTEIN: And also, I would say—as someone who spends a lot of time thinking about these questions of historical context and relations—I think we also don't want to forget that there's also a very visceral context for horror, too: just the thrill-seeking aspect of it. And that one of the things that these films like *Hostel* and *Saw* are plugging into is an audience desire to be pushed viscerally to a place that they haven't been pushed before. And it's not that these two things are mutually exclusive. I mean, we can definitely have horror films that use that kind of visceral jolt to get us to think about certain historical, social, political things; but that these things are always kind of working together—sometimes in a collaborative way, and sometimes kind of at cross purposes—and I think that's part of what we would need to sort out too, in this kind of torture porn.

MCDONAGH: And one of the things that I think is really important about these movies is that—you know, there's a line of thinking that horror films allow you to contain a certain kind of emotion, certain kinds of anxieties. It kind of wraps them up, and at the end it gets solved, and you can go home feeling okay. But I actually never thought that that was what appealed to me about horror movies. What appealed to me about them was that they validated my suspicions about the world; that they validated my feeling that everything wasn't okay; that there were some really wrong things going on beneath the surface of my relatively comfortable, secure middleclass life; and that it wasn't just me, that I wasn't crazy. That that stuff was there, and that I wasn't the only person thinking it, because there were these movies—that somebody was making, and that a lot of people were going to see, and responding to in a very vivid and visceral way—that exposed exactly those anxieties. I think that that's something that hasn't changed between the seventies and now. I think the movies we're seeing now expose those anxieties and validate people's feelings that, "Yeah, you know what? I'm right. That stuff really is there."

BLOOM: Today is Father's Day, and I want to thank all the fathers in the audience for coming. (Laughter) In addition to all the political subtext that you can see in horror films, it's interesting that intimate issues of family are often evoked, and I'd like to talk about some of the ways that the family is evoked in horror films. I think it's a little bit less known that this is—But if you look, that it's something that's really fascinating. Maybe Josh, I'll start with you.

ROTHKOPF: Sure. Well, I think perhaps the ultimate horror family film that is in the series is *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. The—

BLOOM: Which just showed, just right before here...

ROTHKOPF: That was just—right. Did you all stay? Were you here for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*? That's a pretty awesome film. (Laughter) So when you're watching *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—I mean, the title is almost misleading, because it suggests something that's especially gory, and it turns out to be much more about a family that sticks together and is looking for food. (Laughter) And I think that film—*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—for me, speaking personally, was one of the first instances where I began to read into the subtext of what horror is. I've had the opportunity to talk to [director] Tobe Hooper, and sometimes he's articulate about what the film means. But reading into it, it was very clearly, like sort of a class war happening, where Americans sort of misadventure into the backwoods, and then they become food. Now, that could be Vietnam; it could be a sort of mid-seventies class war; the "silent majority"—there's all sorts of levels you can read into it. And I think that the new horror has reclaimed a lot of that social, familial context. I think the first film that comes to mind is *Devil's Rejects*, which feels very reminiscent of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. But also, it has a strong—there's a strong sense of a family sticking together by hook or by crook, and an outlaw family; it feels a lot like *Bonnie and Clyde*. And you can read into the film as less a delivery system for shocks, and more of a sort of skewed, antisocial picture of what a family could possibly be—what *your* family could possibly be.

MCDONAGH: But I think what you're saying about *Texas Chain Saw* is especially interesting because

it's not just one family, it's two families. You have Sally and her brother Franklin, and then you have the young couple, Pam and—I forget the boy's name. So you've pitted two families against each other, in a way that becomes even more apparent in the original version of *The Hills Have Eyes*, you know, which—

ROTHKOPF: Right, and the remake, too.

MCDONAGH: Absolutely—which Wes Craven always described as “The Whitebreads” and “The Other” family. You know, they're the underclass; they're the oppressed; they are the family who never had the advantages, and now they're somehow trying to claw their way up and claim their own. That's a very American anxiety, the idea...

ROTHKOPF: And it happens in this abstract space in the desert, of this post-nuclear space, where...

MCDONAGH: Yes, or the total backwoods of *Texas Chain Saw*. It's like the ground has been cleared, and now these two completely different families are going to duke it out to see who's going to come out on top, and who's going to live the American Dream.

LOWENSTEIN: Which is one of the reasons I really am impressed with *The Hills Have Eyes* remake that's running in this series. It seems like a film that really understands these kinds of family dynamics from the seventies films, and takes them to an even more compelling place. Like, in the remake, one of the major differences between the monster family and the normal family is that the mutants don't have the economic means to forget about the past. They're literally locked in the past. They're trapped inside of it. And it's the wealthy Whitebread family that has things like cars and iPods and television and all these ways to not think about the past.

MCDONAGH: And I think that's why using the atomic testing village is such an incredible stroke in that movie.

LOWENSTEIN: It's brilliant, it's brilliant. It is, it really is. And to have those scenes of the model America—you know, which was, of course, blown up in these atomic explosions—

LEE: Literally, the “model” America.

LOWENSTEIN: Yes, the literal model America is where these mutants live—and they have American flags, and in a lot of ways, they're much more patriotic than the normal family.

MCDONAGH: Right, who are very much out for themselves...

LOWENSTEIN: Right, right! And there's a poignant kind of attachment, I think, that we develop with the outsiders...

MCDONAGH: ...And yet the great thing about both of those versions is that they don't stack the deck, because when the normal family, The Whitebreads, come under siege, they *do* pull together and they *do* look out for each other. You know, they're not the bad guys, they're just the guys who had a better leg up on the ladder—and now suddenly, they're face to face with people who didn't have that leg up, and who are really mad about it.

LOWENSTEIN: And now they're going to eat that leg...

MCDONAGH: Yeah! (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: Had to happen... (Laughter)

MCDONAGH: That's consumerism, isn't it? Thank you, George Romero.

LOWENSTEIN: That's exactly... Yes, yes!

BLOOM: Women are also joining their male counterparts at the boxoffice for horror films. Um, We showed the movie *Saw II* yesterday. And the *New York Times* and Lions Gate reported that 32% of ticket buyers for *Saw II* are women under the age of twenty-five, compared with 28% of men the same age. There are also no women directors of feature films in this series, and with a few rare exceptions—like the wonderful Kathryn Bigelow, for instance, who made the great film, *Near Dark*, in the nineties...

MCDONAGH: Or Stephanie Rothman, who did a couple of movies in the seventies...

BLOOM: ...there are very few women directing feature films. And yet the texts themselves are very

much about women, about simultaneously exploiting and exploring women's issues. I'd like to know what you think about women's relationship to horror films? Maitland, why don't we start with you?

MCDONAGH: I guess I'm the obvious person to start. (Laughter) As we were saying before we came in here, you know, that for the better part of two decades, I could be pretty much guaranteed that I was going to be the only woman in a theater seeing a first run horror movie. Time Square, Midtown—didn't matter where it was, I was the only woman there, except maybe for a couple of girls who had gone with their boyfriends, and who left halfway through, usually dragging the boyfriends with them.

And that to me, frankly, is fascinating, because I always loved horror movies, and I always felt that they were about the battle between the haves and the have-nots. And I think I included women in the have-nots. And so even though a lot of horror movies were, certainly on the surface, about tormenting and murdering women, I always felt that somewhere in them, the dynamic had to do with fighting back; "fighting the power," to use a clichéd phrase; with somehow resisting the status quo, the patriarchal society—I mean, there are a whole lot of terms I could throw at you; you know them all—I felt that that was always built into horror movies. And so even when women were not explicitly the heroes—although they often were; I mean, the concept of the "Final Girl," something Carol Clover talks about a lot, was built in very early to horror movies, and certainly into slasher movies; you see it in the eighties all the time—there was usually a girl.

BLOOM: Can you describe the "Final Girl?"

MCDONAGH: The "Final Girl" was the girl who made it to the end. And she was often the good girl, the one who wasn't off sleeping with her boyfriend in the boat shed while some little camper was drowning, you know... (Laughter) She was the virginal character; she was the one who went to school; got good grades; was nice to her parents; and she was the one who got to make it to the end, because somehow those characteristics gave her the spine, the inner steel that it took to stand up to the bogeyman.

ROTHKOPF: It's not just their virgin status, though. Jamie Lee Curtis will still talk about her role in *Halloween* was the smartest role she's ever taken...

MCDONAGH: Absolutely.

ROTHKOPF: ...And these are women who are figuring situations out and having to learn on the spot and overcome it...

MCDONAGH: Maybe because they weren't always in the boat shed with their boyfriends, they had some time to think.

ROTHKOPF: ...Right! (Laughter)

BLOOM: And at the same time, about *Halloween*, John Carpenter has said that when they described the plot of *Halloween*...

LEE: It's a romance.

BLOOM: ...when he proposed it, he said, it was just a movie about a serial killer who stalked babysitters, and that women were just "bait."

MCDONAGH: Right. And it did go into production under the title *The Babysitter Murders*. I mean, it doesn't get more basic than that.

ROTHKOPF: And what's interesting, also, regarding women is that these new films, they seem to be moving away from the "Final Girl"-type concept, at least in my opinion. I mean, you have Mary Elizabeth Winstead in the *Final Destination* movies, in *Final Destination 3*. She strikes me as sort of a very archetypal "Final Girl"-type character. But for the most part, you get a sense that the violence happening in these movies is sort of—it's not really gender specific. It's inevitable. It's happening to everyone. In *Jigsaw* and *Saw*, for example, really is—he's not a—

MCDONAGH: He's an equal opportunity torturer.

ROTHKOPF: Yes, he's certainly not on some kind of gender revenge.

MCDONAGH: Well, and *The Descent* is the most perfect thing to talk about there. I mean, do you want to address that?

LOWENSTEIN: Well, I just think, you know, *The Descent*, in certain ways, I think shores up Joshua's sense that these films aren't kind of gender specified or gender obsessed, in the same way that the *Halloween* generation of films was, when it was really important that it was a kind of gender-confused female, the "Final Girl" who—she's virginal, she's able to kind of take on masculine things like knives and saws to get the job done...

MCDONAGH: ...And knitting needles, which is kind of great! (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: ...And knitting needles, you know—that paired against a gender-confused male, who's got the chainsaw and who's got the knives, but he doesn't have the "equipment" to do anything sexual. So...

ROTHKOPF: He has a mask.

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah, exactly. And so that was really important for those films. But something like *The Descent* really shows, in a certain way, how anatomical sex is just not as—it's not a battle that these films are that interested in fighting, in a certain way. The fact that we have a completely female group in this film...

LEE: Trapped in a giant stone vagina...

LOWENSTEIN: Exactly, exactly. It's almost as if it's more about the kind of suspense potential; that having a group of very tough women in this situation is more compelling than doing it with men—rather than like, "Well, let's make a statement about how women have certain strengths or certain weaknesses, and that we need a man to sort that out in some kind of way." It's just interested in different things.

MCDONAGH: And one of the things I love about *The Descent* is it's absolutely uncompromising about what happens to those female friendships once the pressure starts being applied. They do not all pull together like good sisters. The internal divisions that have already started to separate them from one another really come to the forefront as soon as the heat is on, and they turn on each other.

BLOOM: One of the words that keeps coming up in describing contemporary horror films is misogynist

or misogynistic, I want to ask you what you think about that accusation?

MCDONAGH: Who wants to take that one? (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: I mean, there's no doubt that the horror films has a special affection for torturing women. There's just no way of getting around that. But I tend to agree with what Maitland was saying earlier, in that the horror film always has a real soft spot, I guess I would say, for the underdog, for the disempowered, for the disadvantaged. And this reaches out to fans, I think, in a certain way, who often feel like, "I'm in a minority, liking these kinds of films. The people I go to school with don't understand this, my parents don't understand this..." So there's always that sense of being "on the outs" that is so crucial to horror. And I think—I agree with Maitland on this—that these films, as extraordinarily cruel as they can be towards women, do have a deep and pretty sophisticated sense of what it means to be female in a society where the norm and the default setting is male.

MCDONAGH: I also think of moments in certain movies that I think people would probably not overtly think of as feminist, that struck me in a really powerful way. And one of them is *Shivers*, David Cronenberg's *They Came From Within* [alternate film title]...

LOWENSTEIN: ...Which is often talked about as a misogynist freak fest...

MCDONAGH: ...Oh, absolutely—and certainly, a lot of really bad things happen to women in that, starting with the mistress of the scientist who's created a parasite—a sex parasite that creeps around the squeaky-clean Toronto housing development infecting people with uncontrollable sexual desire, that's tied with a desire for violence and... It creates a mighty mess, let's say. But there's a sequence near the end where the ostensible hero, the doctor who's trying to fix all this (not very successfully), is speaking to his girlfriend (who he does not yet realize has become one of "the infected," to use the *28 Days-* and *-Weeks Later* term), and she starts telling him about a dream that she had in which she's making love to a very old man. And he's old and he's diseased, and her first thought is, "He's disgusting, he's horrible..." But she says, "...And then I realized that

all flesh is erotic flesh. All flesh is good flesh.” And it’s a chilling moment, because there’s an incredible freedom and liberation in what she’s saying that completely runs counter to where you think it’s going. I mean, you think it’s going to be a horrible moment. But in fact, she has just stated the philosophy that runs through most of Cronenberg’s early movies—the notion of “the new flesh.” And it might not be the flesh that you think right now is the good flesh; but in fact, its own internal greatness is such that it transcends everything. And it’s a moment that gives me chills, frankly—even now.

LOWENSTEIN: To be fair, though—and I think this captures this dynamic perfectly, with the kind of tension in horror films—is the end of that sequence that you’re mentioning ends with the fecal parasite coming out of her mouth and her being slapped by the hero and taping her mouth shut! (Laughter)

MCDONAGH: Yes, but then look where it goes after that. It winds up in that swimming pool, where she looks...

LOWENSTEIN: Right. She gets to kiss him, finally.

MCDONAGH: ...And she looks unbelievably beautiful—and he finally surrenders! He surrenders to the new flesh. It’s extraordinary.

LOWENSTEIN: ...And we sympathize with her. We sympathize with her.

MCDONAGH: Completely.

ROTHKOPF: And let’s talk about—I mean, if we’re really use the M-word, the misogyny word, I mean, why don’t we level that at the other movies that are supposedly more acceptable?

MCDONAGH: How about like romantic comedies?

ROTHKOPF: Like romantic comedies, or say, something like *Spider-Man 3*, where the strong woman character from the last two movies is neutered and turned into this shrill, nagging person. Or *Pirates of the Caribbean*, where you have a great actor like Keira Knightley who’s converted into like a detached element in the film. I mean, that to me is a real misogyny that’s not as explored. Whereas at least in these horror films—fine, the women are getting hurt and killed, but very often they prevail.

The horror genre is the one that has characters like Ellen Ripley in *Alien*. The horror genre—that’s the place where you’ll find [the] Jamie Lee Curtises: The women that prevail. I mean, it’s not really in romantic comedies.

MCDONAGH: No, romantic comedies horrify me, (Laughter) because they uphold...

ROTHKOPF: What scares you?

MCDONAGH: Ugh! (Laughter) Romantic comedies! Which first of all require people in their thirties and forties to act like they were stupid thirteen-year-olds—because otherwise, you can’t make the plot machinations work—and uphold the absolute most oppressive, disempowering stereotypes of relationship between men and women. Give me a horror movie any day! (Laughs)

BLOOM: Nathan, what about you? I’d like to hear you talk about, maybe gender and sexuality in horror.

LEE: Hm... Gender and sexuality in horror. I mean, I think more interesting than, or more relevant than maybe misogyny in horror films is misanthropy—just pure nihilism, regardless of gender. I mean, when we were talking before a little bit about the family sort of dynamics; I think what’s interesting—underlying that, even—is a sense of community. So that horror films are about communities, whether they’re male and female communities, or inside/outside communities; the communities of the infected versus the non-infected.

LOWENSTEIN: And the fans, too.

LEE: The function of gender is a lot about that. It’s about competing in rival communities. And I think one of the most interesting sort of shifts that’s happened between the old horror and the new horror—and this is moving a little bit away from the gender question—is the two *Dawn of the Dead* remakes. In the first *Dawn of the Dead* film, the idea is the survivors arrive at a shopping mall and they’re besieged by zombies, and they form this kind of family, this sort of community, this survival. They band together. It’s about solidarity and creating a new civilization. And I was fascinated in the *Dawn of the Dead* remake that when they get to the shopping mall, they turn on each other, and

they hate each other, and they don't trust each other. And there's this kind of atomizing of society. And to me, that's a really interesting shift between the earlier era that you [Maitland] were speaking about, about the anxiety and the fears of the time, where there was still this lingering sense that there could be a kind of, you know, maybe...

LOWENSTEIN: ...An alternative...

LEE: ...social—that society could come together to survive these things. Now it just feels much more sort of atomized. And I think that film brilliantly sort of encapsulates that. The first time I saw it I just thought, “This is a piece of shit, this movie,” (Laughs) and I missed that sense of them banding together. And I thought, you know, “How horrible and nihilistic this is.” Watching it again, I realized that it unconsciously perfectly expressed a change that had happened in our culture, or in what we think is possible in our culture. So that's a little bit of a shift away from the idea of... (Laughs)

BLOOM: No, that's great. I'd like talk more about that...

LEE: ...gender, but you know, I do think that underlying it is the sense of communities. And it's interesting to watch how a sense of community has changed from the old horror to the new horror.

MCDONAGH: I also think, though, that you see the roots of that in a movie like George Romero's *The Crazies*, which is the anti-*Dawn of the Dead*. And that film is very much—

BLOOM: Both films that are directed by George Romero; both films are directed by the same director.

MCDONAGH: Sorry? Right. And in that film—it very much prefigures *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, in that a virus is unleashed on a small town community—and frankly, they don't pull together. You know, they're torn apart by it. And that was a movie that gave me nightmares, let me tell you, because there was no good ending to that story.

ROTHKOPF: And even Romero seems to be cognizant of the shift. If you watch *Land of the Dead*, which is a very post-socialist movie and a very much...

LOWENSTEIN: ...Absolutely—and the most sympathetic character is a zombie...

ROTHKOPF: ...Right. The most sympathetic character is a zombie, and then you have a sort of a race/class revenge aspect coming out with the John Leguizamo character. And it's very much, “You're out for yourself.” It's not about banding together as a hardy team of survivors. It's a completely different vibe. I've noticed that, too—what Nathan says about the sort of atomizing, the splintering. And that strikes me as very current, too. It's like we're connected, and also very separate. And there's been a lot of critical discussion about MySpace and YouTube, and the idea of a lot of places where new people who are looking for connectivity are actually separating, and I think that the new horror films definitely express that.

BLOOM: Adam, do you want to talk about that a little bit?

LOWENSTEIN: Yes. I would definitely go to *Land of the Dead* also, the way Joshua did. And I'm sure if you had three hundred weeks to show this series, that all of these films would have gotten in here...

ROTHKOPF: Five weeks is way too short...

LOWENSTEIN: ...It's a great selection of films, it's a great selection of films. But *Land of the Dead* does strike me as really interesting along this line about community, which I think Nathan's absolutely right [in] that this is a central horror concern. And *Land of the Dead*, you know, being made by George Romero—the man who we kind of give credit for the birth of the modern horror film, in a lot of ways—is someone who's clearly thought about horror for many years, and felt it in a really deep way. And the place he comes to in *Land of the Dead* is a place where the most sympathetic character is a zombie; and a place where the chief evil character—who is of course the richest character—is played by Dennis Hopper, which really feels like a kind of...

LEE: ...Bitter irony.

LOWENSTEIN: ...A bitter irony about, you know, “Where are we in relation to the sixties and the ideas that we had back then?” The biggest kind of

corporate creep in the film is Dennis Hopper, and he's modeled consciously on Donald Rumsfeld and George Bush. That was an explicit part of—that's part of what got Dennis Hopper to do the movie is, "That, that's what I want to do." So I think the sense of a kind of diminished sense of possibilities for community is something that these new horror films are very much interested in and nervous about, and I think you can see that in different ways across a lot of the films in this series. Like *28 Weeks Later*—you know, even the idea of community down to the level of the family. I mean, the structuring glue there in the family is betrayal. I mean, it's just something that plays itself out in larger and larger circles—in terms of the British authority, the American authority, and then by the end of the film, we're out to Paris and in a great kind of snap moment of the Paris Muslim youth riots. You know, you get that sense that in each of these contexts, there's less and less of a chance, in some kind of way, for people actually connecting with each other in a way that's not horrific.

MCDONAGH: And one of the things that I think is fascinating about Romero is people sometimes talk about his movies as being kind of blunt tools. You know—very obvious in their allegory. But as early as *Dawn of the Dead*, which is only his second zombie movie—you see the zombies as the enemy for most of the film. You have a family, they band together, they find a place to hide, they're fighting off the zombies throughout the entire film. But then there's that moment when the motorcycle gang invades the mall. And they're just having a high old time with their machetes, zooming around the ground floor of the mall decapitating zombies, you know, treating them as objects for them to play with. And all of a sudden, you feel bad for the zombies. And it's a very interesting subtlety, I think, in a film—

LEE: Well, the irony there is that the biker gang is kind of the degenerate counterculture that's come in to this kind of seventies, you know, commercial...

LOWENSTEIN: ...Consumerist paradise.

MCDONAGH: ...Consumer paradise, yes.

LEE: Right, right.

BLOOM: I think Romero said... in the film that we showed yesterday, *The American Nightmare*, "Who's the living dead? Who are the living dead? We are the living dead, because we know we're going to die, and we're walking around."

LOWENSTEIN: Right, right. And I think horror is always very much interested in playing with our sense of identification. And all of these films, even the most kind of primitive and unsuccessful horror films, know that part of what they need to do to engage their audience is play a kind of shifting game with where their sympathies are going to lie. And all of a sudden there are these moment where what you thought was the monster, and what you thought was terrifying, and what you wanted to get away from turns out to be the thing you're rooting for. I think the films are really valuable and useful in that way, in challenging us to test where our sympathies come from, and how we invest them, and how we go about transforming them.

LEE: Well, I'm interested in that idea of identification and who we identify with in a movie by the *Saw* films and the *Final Destination* films, in which it seems to me that the identification process is with the game of the movie itself and the kind of structure and mechanics of these elaborate baroque sort of death systems, and not with any one in particular in the film. It's like what you identify with, what you want to see play out, and what you want to get to know is how this mechanism is going to wind up and resolve itself. So I think that's a really—and I mean, Josh, I know, has...

ROTHKOPF: That's definitely one of the cathartic things about those films for me, too, because there is almost a—it almost assures us—there's a presentation of logic. When you see the way one of Jigsaw's traps work it's like, "Oh, there's a reason why the pain's going to happen! It's because she's not going to be in time to lift the key... or this weight is going to fall..." And when you watch the cutting in a movie like *Final Destination 2* or -3, it's very clear topographically. It's almost like Hitchcock, in a sense. That's very different from, I think, the real world, in the sense that when we see beheadings or the violence happening abroad, there is no reason. We're not getting reasons from government; we're not getting reasons socially. So in a way, I would say these horror films are sort of providing reasons for pain. They're giving us this

sort of a logical structure, and showing us—well, that these machines have consequences. Consequences are...

LEE: So *Saw* is reassuring, in that way...

ROTHKOPF: ...Right, yes. Consequences are what are lacking in today's society. And I think—I mean, that's a very strange identification: when you're going to a horror film for... reasons? Reasons for Abu Ghraib, you know...? And we're not hearing the reasons expressed from authorities...but maybe *Jigsaw* will be the authority! (Laughter) I think that *Jigsaw*, in a lot of ways, is sort of a daddy figure. I mean, he's telling us why. "Oh," you know, "Either we've sinned, or we don't appreciate what we have, or we don't appreciate things we might lose..." and so there's a real sort of a causality being expressed.

MCDONAGH: ...It's for our own good.

ROTHKOPF: ...It's for our own good. Now, I'm not hearing that from George Bush, you know, so...

BLOOM: Lots of horror films are remakes or sequels. This is not unique to horror—as a kid, I went through every Nancy Drew book, and that film is out right now (Laughter) And you see it, and—but it does lead to the perception of the genre as unoriginal. But William Paul writes in his book—one of my favorite lines—he writes, "What critics regard as endless and inane repetition, the audiences themselves see as endless variation." I'd like to know what you think a little bit about this idea, and I'd like to start with Nathan.

LEE: Well, I mean, no genre's more dependent on formula than horror. We go into it having an idea of a template in our head, and we want to see it satisfied, or new twists on it, or pushed to a new extreme. An interesting moment for me, in thinking about all these sort of new horror films, was seeing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* remake, which was reviled by basically everyone, and is a pretty shitty movie in fact! (Laughs) But I remember sitting there watching it and thinking, about an hour in, when the mayhem really starts going, that: A). This is pretty well made; and B). What's really horrifying here is the way the style is, the difference between the style of the original and the remake. The remake has this incredibly clean, polished, sort of burnished, very

suave, I would say "corporate" kind of rhetoric to it and tone to it. It's a package. It looks beautiful. It's sort of beautifully designed and beautifully put together. And you know, the original has this much more confrontational, raw, kind of dirty, grungy aesthetic. I had this moment of watching this film and actually getting really excited by it, by the shift of the horror film from a sort of marginal culture to mainstream culture, and that this was a completely mainstream sort of production in its look and its feel. And so I think that one of the interesting things that's happening in these remakes is that what was once this kind of almost punk, oppositional, independent production has become—you know, has shifted into a little sort of more mainstream phenomenon.

ROTHKOPF: And that becomes almost an economic comment, in the sense that these remakes are Hollywood productions, they're studio productions. And so when you have...

LEE: ...Or quasi-studio, like Lionsgate...

ROTHKOPF: ...Or quasi-studio, or studio funded, at the very least. And then you have an organic film, right, like you say, like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the original, being remade in this sort of glossy sheen, corporate studio style. It's almost as if to say, "Well, here's your entertainment for the weekend." This sort of slick package, and it's the same content. There's something that's very disturbing about it.

LEE: Yes. Well, and you know, the thing about this question of remakes is some of them are very good, and some of them are better than the originals. I think *The Hills Have Eyes* remake is far superior to Wes Craven's, in terms of its filmmaking and its execution. I mean, it couldn't have the cultural impact that the first film had, but I think it's sort of brilliantly made. And it's a knee jerk reaction just to say, "These films are completely useless," or "They're completely crass and commercial."

ROTHKOPF: Horror has a tradition of having better remakes than the originals—if you think about David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, or John Carpenter's *The Thing*, which I would consider superior to the originals—in that because horror is so suggestive and soaks up meanings like a sponge, and can vary depending on the decade or when it's

released, a remake has just as significant chance of succeeding as the original.

MCDONAGH: But for every good remake, there are dozens of terrible remakes...

LEE: There are!

ROTHKOPF: Indeed. (Laughter)

MCDONAGH: ...That take the story, divorce it from all the roots that made it interesting. Something like *Black Christmas*. I mean, just abysmal. Depressingly bad.

LEE: Yes. The majority are wretched....

MCDONAGH: ...are just grim...

LOWENSTEIN: ...And I think part of this question about the remakes—I think one of the things that's underlying some of the comments here is a sense that the seventies horror films were coming from a really oppositional place, both aesthetically and economically. Things like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Last House on the Left*, *Night of the Living Dead*—these were films that were so far from Hollywood, geographically and spiritually, that there was a real sense of, "Wow, this is a voice that we just don't get to hear!" And having the films—like *Texas Chain Saw*, and *Night of the Living Dead*, and even *The Last House on the Left*, I hear, is in the pipeline as a remake—to have these things taken up by corporate mainstream studios and given that glossy mainstream look to kind of make them acceptable mainstream entertainment, does seem like a loss, in a certain way.

ROTHKOPF: A loss, but also, it's—I mean, even though it's co-opted by studios, it's kind of almost like a stealth. It can be seen as even more horrific, in a sense. Like, the corporate authorities...

LOWENSTEIN: Yes, like body snatching...

ROTHKOPF: ...That we buy our entertainment from, they have the same sadistic reasons as the originals. I watched the *Black Christmas* remake when it came out. And of course, my first knee jerk reaction is, "Oh, it doesn't understand the poetry of the original, Bob Clark's film," or whatever. But then I'm thinking to myself, "Well, you know, these characters are so plastic! And the actors playing

them, they're really ruining it! And is this what the studio thinks who I am?"

MCDONAGH: And can we talk about the hideous over-explaining? Which I think is something that the studio environment really encourages. It's that you can't just have the madman that you don't know where he came from, you don't know why he's doing this stuff, you just know he's there. Well here, we have to know—where he came from, why he's doing it, every detail. I was on my watch after about fifteen minutes. And you know what? I don't care. This is not interesting to me. I want to see the dynamic between those girls in the sorority house. That's what's interesting. Not, "Oh, boo-hoo, what made this killer the killer he is?"

ROTHKOPF: Reacting to that too, though—if you take a meta-step almost away from the film, you could say that there's something horrific in the idea of the studio devaluing our expectations about that.

BLOOM: I'm going to ask one more question, and then open it up to the audience. People are often judgmental about filmmakers and audiences who are interested in this genre. And I'd like to know how you respond to that. I'll start with you, Maitland.

MCDONAGH: You know what? I almost want to say, "You know, if I have to explain it to you, you don't get it. It's like jazz, you really..." {Laughter} There is a very visceral appeal to horror movies. And I'm somebody who has spent much of my adult life thinking about horror movies, and thinking of reasons that I like particular things, and reasons that I think particular aspects of particular horror films are very potent. But the fact is: I love them. I just love them. They are such a kick, they are such an experience. More than most movies I see—and you know, I'm a weekly critic, I see a lot of movies—I can be immersed in a horror film more quickly than I can be immersed in all but the best of almost any other genre of film. And I love that. That's what I go to the movies for: to be immersed in a reality that's not mine and that I don't have control over.

LEE: I mean, in my personal experience, I think most film critics actually do really love horror movies. I wonder if maybe part of why they're so tough on them is the disappointment; is that they do love

horror films, and when they're disappointed by them, they're especially savage about it.

MCDONAGH: Right, and I'm disappointed all the time, but also perennially hopeful.

BLOOM: Alright, great. I'd like to open it up.
(Repeats audience question) Where should horror films go?

MCDONAGH: Wherever they dare, yeah?

LOWENSTEIN: Right. I think it would be the absolute wrong thing for a horror film director, even with the best of intentions, to say, "You know what? I'm really upset with the Iraq War. I'm really upset with where the country is going, and I'm going to make a horror film that has a message about where I think the country should be going."

MCDONAGH: ...And you get *The Hills Have Eyes II*.

LOWENSTEIN: Right—something unfortunate. I think what has to be trusted is a kind of—for filmmakers to be more receptive to their fears and the mood of the way things are feeling, rather than any kind of explicit, you know, "I'm going to make a one-to-one statement. Like, I'm going to have a George Bush stand-in in my movie, I'm going to have an Iraq War stand-in..." That's almost always going to lead to a kind of hackneyed, boring result, and I think that tapping into the mood of the country in less explicit ways is really the way to go. And that's clearly something that—as Maitland was saying earlier about the seventies films—is what these directors were attentive to was the mood of the country and this sense of "There might not be a tomorrow." And I think that's where horror really gets its power from—not from a specific sense of "Here's a particular political situation that I need to make a comment on"—because by the time the film comes out, the political situation has changed.

ROTHKOPF: If you want to be told how to think, then horror's not the genre for you. It's almost as if horror gets its power from being suggestive, not from being prescriptive.

LOWENSTEIN: Absolutely.

ROTHKOPF: When we look back on the films that are coming out now, they're not going to—I mean, as

much as I love Joe Dante's *Homecoming*, which is, I think, perhaps one of the most on-the-nose type...

LOWENSTEIN: It's explicit, yes—and it's great, it's great...

ROTHKOPF: ...of explicit political films. That's a film about zombies of dead veterans returning to America and voting out the Republicans from office, and going to the polls. And I love that idea, but that's going to seem, I think, almost a little too dated—in the sense that when you have a film like *The Descent*, which actually, almost unwittingly, has political ramifications of a bunch of Brits in a cave, led by an American who doesn't have a map...

MCDONAGH: ...And takes them to hell...

ROTHKOPF: ...And takes them to hell, (Laughter) and they all die—the politics in that situation are going to seem much more apparent to future generations.

MCDONAGH: Although interestingly, I think the film that's on the double bill with *Homecoming*, *Deathdream*—which is under another title, right? [*Dead of Night*]—is quite explicitly about the Vietnam experience, at the same time that it's a spin on *The Monkey's Paw*. You know, it's a spin on the old tale: You should be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it. And its explicit Vietnam allusions—it's about a mother who desperately wants her son to come home from Vietnam, and she wishes him home, but he's dead, and he comes home 'the living dead,' and the ramifications of that are pretty horrifying—are not diminished. The explicitness there does not detract from the suggestiveness. So it is possible.

LOWENSTEIN: Although "Vietnam" is actually never spoken aloud in that film...

MCDONAGH: You're right. It's not.

LOWENSTEIN: ...Although in the new *Hostel* film, there's a line where someone actually says they think killing people for business is degenerate, but "What about New Orleans or Chad or Darfur..." or whatever—and that just makes you want to leave the theater. It just feels like a cheap shot that's not earning its power.

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) Can you talk about the resurgence and importance of other cultures' horror, besides American horror?

LEE: That's an immense subject that we could talk about for the whole night. (Laughs)

ROTHKOPF: Stick around...

LEE: I'll just add a couple things. One is that I think the J-Horror phenomenon of the nineties was very...

BLOOM: (That means Japanese horror...)

LEE: ...Yes, the Japanese horror—these kind of very careful, calibrated sort of ghost stories—are really much closer to the kind of *Scream* sort of ironic, sort of snarky teen horror films of that time. Kind of toothless, sort of stylistic exercises, not really going after something of transgressive force. And I think that era has ended, almost completely, or has been transformed a little bit into the *Final Destination/Saw*-sort of mechanic films. So I think some of the J-Horror films are quite good, but I think that they had a very historical lifespan that's since ended.

There is an interesting thing, with these new horror films that we're talking about, of foreign filmmakers also duplicating these seventies aesthetics. Films like *Wolf Creek*, which does this kind of...

BLOOM: (Australian.)

LEE: ...you know: Hotties in the Australian outback get savaged by this garage maniac. And *High Tension*, Alexandre Aja's film, which I think until the tragic finale, is a really superb film...

MCDONAGH: Oh, it's kick ass, no question!

BLOOM: (That's a French film.)

LEE: And there are other examples, but I think those are two of maybe the most widely seen and talked about. They're also a part of this kind of return to a seventies aesthetic and the dynamics of the seventies films: expressing similar anxieties about battling communities, and going outside your comfort zone into the wilderness. I think in America

you could say, in a very glib sense, that this is a "red state/blue state" kind of fear about the deranged hillbilly. But it's a fear that is resonating across the globe right now, so...

BLOOM: Nathan, I wonder if you could also talk a little bit about how you see some of these trends playing out in other genres.

LEE: This comes a little bit back to the talk about the process—the process of horror, and these films showing us the mechanism of horror, and identifying with this process, this system of atrocity and brutalization. We were talking earlier about, "Is *Passion of the Christ* part of this dialogue? Does the sort of atrocity and horror of that film relate to what these new horror films are doing?" I remember being struck by the simultaneous release of *United 93* and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*—speaking of foreign films, I guess (Laughs)—both of which are about...

BLOOM: (British and Romanian...)

LEE: A British-American and a Romanian film, both of which are about a death that you know is going to happen. They're doom narratives—doomsday narratives—and the journey of the audience is to find out how that death and how that disaster is going to happen. That seems also what *The Passion of the Christ* is about, and related, I think, to what some of these horror films do, in really engaging us with the actual process and texture of violence and destruction, and this apocalyptic nihilism of these films.

ROTHKOPF: You could add to that list a film I actually haven't seen, which is *A Mighty Heart*, this new Angelina Jolie film about the [Daniel] Pearl beheading, which is almost like a highbrow version of these new horror films. It's a death that we know is coming. And I was talking to someone who had seen the film, and I heard that to the filmmaker's great credit—it's Michael Winterbottom, who is a great filmmaker—he doesn't show it. He doesn't show the beheading, which is something that we could all see on YouTube. And I was thinking, "Is that to his great credit? Does that elevate the tone? Does taking a barbaric act and not showing it somehow make your treatment of it more sophisticated?" Whereas the films that we're talking about today, show it, and they kind of rub your

snout in it. It's a knee jerk reaction to say, "Well, the filmmakers are barbaric!" Well, maybe they're responding to it in a more honest way than this sort of highbrow way.

LEE: Well, and I think with the extremity of these new horror films, in terms of what they will show and are willing to show, you have to factor in, I think, that this is a reaction, in some part, to the internet; that you can see the *most* fucked-up shit on the internet; just Google anything in there. It's raised the bar on what is kind of widely available, in terms of images of atrocity that aren't really specialized; you can find it on any computer. I think horror films, in showing that extremity, are related in a way to special effects blockbusters. They're the two kinds of movies where an audience can go and see something they can't see anywhere else, in a public setting: these sort of extremes of cinematic representation. And I think part of why this is getting more extreme has nothing to do with politics, but just by the fact that these kinds of images are so much more widely available.

LOWENSTEIN: Yes, and in terms of that theme of pushing audiences to places they haven't been, I feel like it's important to go back to the question, also, about international contexts of horror and non-American horror. I disagree with Nathan on this in terms of—I really think the Japanese boom is, in many ways, just as impressive as the American boom in the seventies. Filmmakers like Takashi Miike—I mean, his entire body of work is based on this pushing of the envelope, to really make you uncomfortable with what you are seeing and what you are feeling. And you balance someone like Miike, who's so invested in that in-your-face visceral horror, with someone like Kiyoshi Kurosawa, who has the complete opposite sense of how you get under an audience's skin and what horror is all about. The fact that you can have two such wildly talented and imaginative filmmakers coming from the same country at the same time just gives a kind of thumbnail indication of what's going on in Japan. The horror films coming out of Korea are also really interesting. I was really happy to see *The Host* represented in this series.

MCDONAGH: The best monster movie in I don't know how many years.

LOWENSTEIN: It's fantastic. It's fantastic. It does horror well, it does melodrama well, it does a family story [well]. On each of the places it goes, it excels. And I think Asia right now, for me, is the most exciting place for horror.

MCDONAGH: I also think it's fascinating to see a film like *Calvaire*, which is a Belgian film, which is as completely invested in the aesthetics of the American seventies as any American film I've seen since the seventies, and frankly, was pretty horrifying. So it's something that is international.

The thing that I feel very sad about is I'm not seeing a lot of interesting work coming out of Italy. And Italy was absolutely paramount in forming my sensibility about horror films: the *gialli* of the seventies—and *gialli* are really more thrillers than horror films, and yet their intensity, I think, pushes them into the realm of horror—absolutely helped to shape the way I think about horror films, because what they were all about was the chaos that lies right underneath the surface of everyday life. You didn't have to go in the backwoods to have something awful happen to you. You could be on your way to your beautiful apartment in a lovely high-rise building in Milan, and the horror would come to you. And it came to you in the middle of great beauty, and a really wonderful aesthetic sense. They were fantastic films, very influential films—I mean, *Hostel II* certainly derives a great deal from the Italian *gialli*—and frankly, the Italians aren't doing much right now. I want them to do better! (Laughter)

ROTHKOPF: And it's too bad, because when you consider some of the early work by Dario Argento—or something like *Suspiria*, which I think maybe aesthetically, could be considered a granddaddy to a lot of this stuff. That's some of the first works that gets attacked for its total emptiness. I mean, it's so aesthetically pure; and politically—there's a void.

MCDONAGH: No, it's drawing much more of fairytale traditions...

ROTHKOPF: Right, right...

MCDONAGH: ...And not just *Suspiria*; all the *gialli*, frankly. You know: Girls keep running into the big bad wolf every place they go. And it really is not about a prevailing political feeling. It's about that

basic fear that there is a big bad wolf, and there is a bogeyman, and there is somebody in your closet, or under your bed. And that's very potent. You can laugh about them now, but I still don't want to go poking around strange closets in the middle of the night—and that shower curtain? Who knows what's back there? (Laughter) It's potent. It goes to a very primal place.

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) What is the point-of-view in contemporary horror, as compared to some of the first-person camera work in horror of the 1970s?

LEE: It's the point of view of a marketing executive... (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: A keen publicist...

LEE: ...Which is far more horrific than Michael Myers!

MCDONAGH: Well, you know, I think that point-of-view thing is very much characteristic of slasher films, very specifically. It's not a horror thing generally. And slasher movies definitely anticipated, frankly, a whole school of video games—first-person shooter games—in which you are put in the position of the purveyor of mayhem. In the hands of a good filmmaker, I don't think those films were inherently misogynistic, or inherently forced you to sympathize or empathize any more than a Hitchcock film like *Rear Window* makes you explicitly empathize with the killer. And yet the scene in which Grace Kelly goes into his apartment and is poking around and you realize he's coming back—don't we all kind of feel like he should catch her? I'm not actually feeling so scared for her as I'm hoping that he's actually going to get there and find her going through his stuff. That kind of shifting point-of-view thing is the thing that a good filmmaker will do; and a bad filmmaker will just put you in the position of the killer, and let you pick 'em off.

LEE: And you've always got to be careful to say that, "This kind of camera angle or this sort of perspective *necessarily* makes the spectator identify with this person in the film." It's always much more complicated than that.

LOWENSTEIN: Right. I mean, it's very easy—and this is one of the things, I think, that Siskel and Ebert at the time latched onto—it's very easy to say, "I want to say these films are misogynistic. What's the easiest way to get that point across?" than to say, "Look, we're put in the point-of-view of the killer. What could be more misogynistic than wanting to kill these defenceless women?" But of course, you know, as Nathan is pointed out, cinema doesn't work that way. It just doesn't work that way. Even if we're in that first-person perspective, our sympathies and our attention and our fantasies and our thoughts are all over the place. We're never going to be locked into a point-of-view in that kind of literalist, simple-minded way.

ROTHKOPF: And it's not necessarily just the grammar. I think the most explosive, contentious aspect of the new horror comes when you go to see it with an audience in the theater. Then the identification... It's when a kill happens. And are people applauding? Some people are applauding, and some people are grossed out. But that's the real question of the identification. It's not necessarily: Is it a first person shot, a Steadicam shot, like in *Halloween*? But are we supposed to be getting off on the kill? And it's an open question. I don't think...

LEE: ...And are they applauding because it's arousing bloodlust? Or because the killing was done in a particularly deft way by the filmmaker? Or that it surprises them...

ROTHKOPF: ...Or is it necessitated by the story?

LEE: ...and they're delighted that they've been shocked? Or are they applauding the idea of their own destruction?

ROTHKOPF: That's the real question: Where's the identification when the violence happens? And I think each one of these films, you have to assess it on its own terms, because some of them fail that.

MCDONAGH: And this is one of the things I think is so extraordinary about *The Devil's Rejects*. You do absolutely, explicitly identify with this monstrous family. I mean, they are very much a modern day equivalent of the family in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. But people don't cheer or applaud when they do awful things. So you have an absolute

identification at the same time that you don't have a kind of impulse to cheer for what they do. That's a very complex thing that's going on there, and *really* well done.

ROTHKOPF: ...Versus the end, say—and this is my opinion—of a movie like *Hostel: Part II*, where I think the filmmaker is very much trying to use the violence as a *wooo* moment—an audience-rousing moment. And that's really what we have to identify: What's the appeal of the movie?

BLOOM: Going back to your question, though, there is this idea called the *cinfantastic* that Carol Clover and John Nash both write about. You have a sort of profusion of perspectives—so you're seeing something from the perspective of a killer and also of a victim—and how complicated that relationship is. So when you put that in something like *Wolf Creek* or *Hostel*, where your victims are Westerners and they're textually being punished for their trespasses in sort of a xenophobia parable—it's a really complicated sort of self-inflicting pain. If you're the killer, and you're also the victim, and you're watching this murder for the reason of being a Westerner, it's a really complicated dynamic. Can you talk a little bit more about that idea?

LEE: We should hand out the Clover book, it's...

ROTHKOPF: ...Required reading.

LEE: If you're interested in this idea of identification, have you heard of this book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* by Carol Clover? It's a really interesting book that goes into a great deal of analysis of this very question. I think it's informed probably all of our understandings of horror films.

MCDONAGH: Absolutely.

ROTHKOPF: It's a good start in terms of killing off the director or the intentionality of a film, and then reading into it. And just the title alone—*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*—it's inviting, it's humorous, and it's a very playful book.

BLOOM: We'll take another question from the audience. (Repeats audience question) What do you think about the recent box office failure of *Hostel II*? And I want to point out that *Hostel II* was

made for about 10 million dollars, and it made about 8 million dollars its first weekend alone...

LEE: ...it has since, grossed \$14 [million], and is still in theaters ...

MCDONAGH: ...and is going to clean up on DVD...

LEE: ...it'll clean up on DVD...

MCDONAGH: ...So: not a failure.

BLOOM: There were some articles saying that.

LEE: There is that *Times* article... (Laughter)

ROTHKOPF: A strangely unsubstantiated piece, which we read, and we were like, "Oh, I guess the bubble's burst and the new horror's over"—that's not to say that we don't have a vested interest up here—but there's an economic strata for these films that has to be considered, which is that they're made for very low budgets, and once they have their opening weekend, they are profitable, or at least breaking even.

BLOOM: You're talking also in that weekend, about a film that's going up against a film like *Ocean's Thirteen*, which was made for hundreds of millions of dollars.

MCDONAGH: And also—and this is something else we were all saying earlier—horror never goes away. There are big booms, and there are troughs. But horror is never, ever gone, because horror addresses something so primal and so vivid that you can't kill it off. You *can* spend too much money on horror movies. And that's something that the producer of *Halloween* once told me in an interview. He said, "The mistake that a lot of big studios make is they spend too much money on horror movies, because they will never, ever reach out to an audience that doesn't basically like horror movies." That's all there is; but it doesn't mean you can't make money on them.

LEE: And what is profitability? I mean, this is the question, I think, *not* asked in that *Times* piece. When a movie like *Saw* is made for, what, 4 million dollars, and makes \$400 million, it's a massive global phenomenon, and we can say horror is hugely profitable. *Hostel II* can make maybe \$10,

\$20 million at the box office and then millions and millions more on DVD. Everyone's making a lot of money. The scale of it may not be this astronomical hit, but...

MCDONAGH: It's not a blockbuster...

LEE: ...Yes, it's not a blockbuster, but I think it's premature to say that horror films aren't profitable anymore.

ROTHKOPF: It's also the significance. I mean, *Saw* is being referenced on *The Sopranos*. These films are making a cultural impact that's almost above and beyond the grosses. When people talk about the horror moment dying, like that *Times* piece, I have to wonder: Are we really going to be talking about *Pirates of the Caribbean III*, I mean, in a few years? Is there going to be a museum series about it? (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: There better not be.

ROTHKOPF: ...I'm not going to speak at it! (Laughter) But I think that these movies, by pushing boundaries in a conceptual level, are more interesting in that regard.

MCDONAGH: And I think we all kind of think, also, that there's a little bit of spite in articles like that. That they're written by people who don't like horror movies, and who are looking for any opportunity to say, "Oh, thank God! That horrible disgusting lapse in public taste that's supported these horror movies is finally over. Horror is going bust, and now these things are going away." I just don't think it's true. They're not going anyplace. And frankly, direct-to-DVD has been one of the greatest things that has happened to the horror genre. Yes, there's a lot of junk that goes direct to DVD; but it's also an opportunity for a lot of filmmakers working on a relatively low budget to make movies, and some of them are terrific.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is a question for Maitland McDonagh. Is there any place where we can see and hear your witty comments about movies?

MCDONAGH: (Laughs) Yes, you can see me on Movie Talk, tvguide.com's weekly VODcast. You

can hear me talk about *Hostel II*, in fact, if you want, which I liked much more than my fellow panellists.

BLOOM: Why did you like it?

MCDONAGH: First, because I thought that as movie that had to be made—because let's face it, you can't make the money that *Hostel* made and not have to make *Hostel II*; that's just a given—I actually respect Eli Roth for not handing it off to somebody else, for making it himself, for keeping his production team. I think it's very clever. I think it taps—rather than into an explicitly political kind of vibe, which is what you get in the first *Hostel*, and which I liked a lot—more into that fairytale vibe. [There is] a lot of influence of the *gialli*, which I love so much. And I like that he found a way to make a movie about kidnapping and torturing three girls and not have it be the lowest common denominator kind of film that it could easily have been. He actually wrung some nice changes on that formula. And that's what I liked about it. Bad ending, but still.

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) What do you think of the character of Jigsaw? And is he suggestive of deepening insanity in the culture? (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: Well, I think with Jigsaw, the first word that occurs to me to think about him isn't sadistic or insane—although those apply, for sure—but moralistic, which is probably the worst combination of insanity and sadism. (Laughter) I really agree with some of the things that the panel was saying earlier, in terms of that film—and Jigsaw as the killer—being satisfying in some kind of way, or alluring to audiences, precisely because there seems to be an explanation that you can get. He's in control. Whether it's about his motives and figuring those out, or the film itself, like Nathan was saying, as a puzzle. Like, the tagline for *Saw* is "Every puzzle has its pieces." Ha-ha-ha.

ROTHKOPF: [Another tagline] "Oh, yes, there will be blood." (Laughter)

LOWENSTEIN: Right; and so there's this kind of sense of a game that can actually be figured out; that has its rules, that you can make your way through it and master, even, in some kind of way. That is part of the appeal. And this could not be further from the aesthetic of a lot of the Japan

horror films, for example, where there's nothing you could possibly do to figure out why you are going to die. (Laughter) You just *are* going to die.

MCDONAGH: Well, that's the greatness of *The Grudge*. All you have to do is walk into that house, and that darkness will follow you wherever you go.

LOWENSTEIN: Yes, absolutely. It doesn't matter how nice you are, or virginal you are ...

ROTHKOPF: And it's not just the J-Horror films—it's real life. It's like that impudent question that we've been asking ourselves for the last sixty years of, "Why do they hate us?" Why does Jigsaw hate us? I mean, the reasons are pretty clear. They're laid out: "We didn't value X, Y and Z," or, "We were druggies, so he's going to make us crawl in a pit of needles." There's causality, there are reasons to it. And I think that's what people are thirsting for.

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) What do you think of *The Exorcist* in the context of other 1970s horror films? And also, why wasn't *Grindhouse* successful?

MCDONAGH: It'll make its money on DVD. Watch.

ROTHKOPF: Because *Grindhouse* was like the Walter Mondale of horror movies. (Laughter) In that it was sort of teaching us about taxes, and then also asking us to vote for it at the same time. (Laughter) It was high fiber and it was sort of like, "Don't you remember these movies? Oh, you don't? Oh, don't you? Here they are..." And then also, "Sit for three hours and do it." (Laughter)

MCDONAGH: I enjoyed the hell out of *Grindhouse*, so... I'm not going to call it the "Walter Mondale of horror movies."

LOWENSTEIN: I'm glad you bring up *The Exorcist*, actually, because one of the things we haven't touched on yet—and it seems like we've touched on quite a lot—is the differences between high-end and low-end horror. *The Exorcist* was an early example of a major studio investing in a horror film in a major way, with major stars; but being very aware of the success that films like *The Last House on the Left* had had, and not being scared of incorporating some of that visceral ickiness into a film with a much more burnished and highfalutin

context. I think that kind of negotiation between high and low is something that's really interesting to watch in horror—and this is an exercise I do with my students all the time, actually, because they come into my classes and they say—"You're showing us all these low budget, gritty films. But they've got nothing to do with something like a great film like *Silence of the Lambs*. That's a great film: It's got Anthony Hopkins, and it won Academy Awards, and it has Jodie Foster..." And I always say to them, "Show me something in that film that's not already in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *The Last House on the Left*." You just take those dressings—the money, and the stars, and the nifty cinematography—and it was all there already. And yet, *Silence of the Lambs* is often perceived of as a psychological thriller, not a horror film. And that kind of distinction between the horror film and the psychological thriller, I think, often stands in for this kind of high/low distinction. And to me, it doesn't hold much water—and for you, either, I think, in thinking of *The Exorcist* as a horror film.

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) This is a great idea to end on, this idea of catharsis. So could you talk a little bit about that?

LOWENSTEIN: I have this thing with catharsis, because it's been for so long the place for people to go to defend horror—the people who want to say, "Well, I don't like horror movies, necessarily, but at least they're cathartic; at least they allow me to deal with something that maybe I haven't dealt with, and I get over on the other side and I've moved on, I've progressed."

MCDONAGH: You've found closure.

LOWENSTEIN: "I've found closure, exactly; and I'm ready to go on Oprah." (Laughter) But the thing to me that's most valuable about horror films is precisely their resistance to catharsis. The idea that these are the films we can rely on to remind us that what we thought we had worked through—what we thought we had dealt with, what we thought we had understood—we actually didn't understand at all, we didn't work it through at all, and we're repeating it, and it will come back. That's what these films remind us of, in a way that... So many other kinds of films are invested in catharsis in that forgetting sense, in a kind of getting-over sense. Horror is invested in precisely the opposite. It's invested in

making us remember, even if that hurts. That's where these films matter, I would say.

MCDONAGH: I'd like to address what I think was another part of your question, which is, "Are the movies that you see when you're young the ones that will always mean the most to you? And are you always going back to them in your head because they [marked] the first time you saw something, or the first time that something that you were thinking about was somehow clarified for you by a movie?" And I think that's something that probably all of us are aware of and think about. You know, you don't want to dismiss newer movies just because they don't give you the jolt that you got the first time you saw something, because, well, that's not fair; that's about you, and not about the movie.

But I am always looking for a movie that will excite me, that will show me something or make me think about something in a way that I didn't think about it before, or that I hadn't seen before. I look for that everywhere, and I find it—not as often maybe as I would like—but I find it in all kinds of places, not just horror movies. I'll see a movie like *The Return*—a Russian movie that came out a couple of years ago, about a father who suddenly reappears in his family's life and takes his two sons on a fishing trip—that goes someplace that I hadn't expected... and I'm happy again, because I've seen some[thing]—that movie gave me something that I didn't have before.

LEE: But I would say this idea of a glut and if you get exhausted or uninspired: It only takes one movie. It only takes one movie every six months...

MCDONAGH: And you're happy again.

LEE: ...Maybe longer. That's all it takes, just one, you know?

ROTHKOPF: ...And the good news is the current crop is *not* slim. I mean, that's kind of what the point of this series is—is that we're finding significance in the new films. But one of the things that I'll always love about horror—and maybe there's a reason for it, maybe you guys have an idea about it—but it seems like a very young genre. It's practiced by young people. And if you consider the big successes—something like *The Blair Witch Project*, which we actually haven't talked about—but that's

almost like a student film in some ways, and that's millions and millions of dollars grossed. There's something about seeing the cutting edge of craft of digital versus analogue, of ideas of political response, even naïveté expressed in horror. And you don't really see that in other genres.

LOWENSTEIN: No, absolutely. And I'm always very moved by quotes from filmmakers who we now consider master filmmakers—David Cronenberg, or Wes Craven, or George Romero—but you go back and look at their early films, and they say this openly themselves: "These early horror films I made was my way of going to film school. And I knew that there was a young audience out there that would be sympathetic and receptive to what I was doing, even though I didn't know how to handle a camera the way I wanted to, and I didn't know how to tell a story in the most economical way. But I knew there was an audience of like-minded people out there that would see what I was trying to accomplish." And I think that's one of the real hopeful aspects of the genre to me, is that it does have this endlessly youthful dimension to it.

MCDONAGH: I also think that—I'm probably speaking for all of us, but tell me if I'm not—that when I mention older films in a review of a newer film, it's not always because I'm saying, "This new film is bad because it's derivative." I'm mentioning those older films because I think that the person who might like this new film might want to see those other films, too. I see it as a way of bringing things to people, not as a way of slapping down new movies with old. And I think readers sometimes take it that way, and it is absolutely not the way I mean it, and I don't think any of us do.

LOWENSTEIN: I think horror is healthy. (Laughter)

MCDONAGH: ...Whether we do anything about it or not. Horror exists independently of any of us, because it's tapped into that primal, primal stuff.

BLOOM: Horror is healthy: you heard it here. (Laughter) For the next six weekends, you can come and get healthy here (Laughter) at the Museum of the Moving Image, with our series *It's Only a Movie: Horror Films from the 1970s and Today*. I see no reason why you shouldn't be here every weekend until July 22. There are two programs I'll just let you know about in particular,

among the many different programs here. On July 22, Amy Villarejo will be speaking about gender and sexuality in *The Last House on the Left* and *The Descent*. And then Saturday, June 30 at 2:00 p.m., the maverick filmmaker Larry Cohen will be here with an archival 35mm print of his film *It's Alive*, from 1974. So I hope you'll all join us here for that.

On behalf of the museum, I'd like to thank all of our panelists today, and our audience for coming. Thank you. (Applause)

PANELISTS: Thank you, thank you all.

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